

Archived Information

Interim Evaluation of the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory

I. Brief Overview of Laboratory

During the week of April 5-9, 1999, I served on a panel comprised of six individuals charged with the responsibility to conduct a comprehensive on-site evaluation of the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (NWREL) at its headquarters in Portland, Oregon. NWREL, one of ten regional educational laboratories in the country, provides educational services to a designated region that includes Alaska, Idaho, Montana, Oregon, and Washington.

Prior to the site visit, I reviewed all print material submitted by the Laboratory via the evaluation contractor, Decision Information Resources, Inc. During the visit to the Lab, panel members listened to presentations by Lab staff members and engaged in discussions with board members, Laboratory clients, and focus groups (trainers and users). We also interviewed the Laboratory program officer who represents the Laboratory's funding agent, the United States Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI). Panel members were also given a guided tour of the Laboratory facilities.

II. Implementation and Management

A. To what extent is the REL doing what they were approved to do during their first three contract years?

1. Strengths

NWREL, hereafter referred to as the Lab, has been involved in providing educational services in its designated region and beyond since 1966. During this time, the Lab has developed

a credible and exemplary reputation as a provider of education services. To date, the Lab appears to be meeting all expectations with regard to its contract obligations. Specifically: (1) the contractual activities of the Lab are based on an extensive needs assessment of the region and the work scope under each task is based on such needs; (2) staff members appear to be qualified to carry out proposed tasks; (3) the organizational and management structure appear to be appropriate for carrying out Lab activities; (4) the Lab appears to be implementing the scope of work according to its approved contract and in instances where changes were necessary, modifications with appropriate justifications were requested in a timely manner; and (5) the fiscal resources of NWREL, which are derived from a variety of sources (other federal, state agencies, local schools, higher education) in addition to OERI, are used to leverage a comprehensive, systemic education improvement program that has regional as well as national impact.

Following an assessment of the Lab governing board, it was restructured and now has 26 members. Under its original plan, the board had 45 members including the Chief State School Officers (CSSO) of each state in the Lab region. Discussions with four of the board members, including the chair, indicate the new configuration is much more effective for carrying out board responsibilities. The board established eight committees to oversee and address issues regarding the overall operation of the Lab, including OERI funded Lab activities. The committees appear to be appropriate for the purposes of board oversight. A review of the minutes of board meetings indicates that appropriate action is taken on committee matters as necessary.

The Lab network appears to be extensive and appropriate for the purposes of its activities. The network includes state education agencies, local education agencies, universities, other educational laboratories as well as educational organizations. Discussions with board members

and clients indicate that the Lab is providing effective services as requested both within and beyond its region.

2. Areas of needed improvement

A major factor in Lab program operations is its governing board. This board appears to be functioning in an effective and efficient manner. However, it is interesting to note that the board does not appear to have parent representation. Even student representatives are not precluded from serving on the board. While the Lab is not required to include either of these role groups on its board, it would appear that such inclusion would be in the best interest of the Lab since its primary constituents are students who ultimately receive and hopefully benefit from Lab services. In response to this concern, Lab staff stated that parents serve on advisory committees. However, this does not give this role group a voice in the governance of the Lab.

With regard to board representation by CSSOs, only four of the five appear to be members of the board. Apparently the CSSO from the state of Oregon is not on board at this time. The panel members learned that in all instances, the CSSOs have designated personal representatives to represent them on the board and, thus, do not appear to be active participants in board activities. In lieu of CSSO participation at the board meetings, they are convened via telephone on a quarterly basis to discuss issues regarding Lab activities in the region. While the designated representatives are no doubt capable of representing the position, it seems that the visibility of the CSSO is vital to the Lab's efforts to effectively implement school change on a statewide basis.

During a discussion on the use and impact of the Lab's specialty area (school change model), a question was asked regarding the Lab's collaboration with other Labs in regions where the school change model is being implemented. Curiously, it does not appear that much

collaboration takes place between Labs when one Lab provides services in another Lab's region. It would seem that when implementing and providing services--particularly in the specialty areas--which all Labs have, there would be more collaboration among the Labs.

The Lab (in response to a technical question) stated its intent to use some of its resources to provide professional development for staff in its efforts to effectively develop and implement activities under its scope of work. Such activities were to be provided on-site as well as through seminars, conferences, and college course work outside the Laboratory. The extent to which such staff development activities have occurred or are occurring was not readily apparent in reviewing the available material. In response to this issue, staff reported that \$70,000 were spent for staff development activities. An Employee Assistance Program is now available to staff as a result of a cooperative arrangement between the Lab and a service agent in the area. If not already provided, the Lab may wish to consider providing information on staff development in the quarterly reports that are sent to OERI.

In seeking to understand the Lab's overall governance and management plans, I reviewed a number of items addressing this area. The Lab's report on institutional performance is an example of items reviewed. While there is a heavy emphasis on the impact of Lab activities, ("Who does NWREL represent?" or "How well know is NWREL..." or "How does NWREL mobilize...?") there is very little information regarding how well staff members function in their prescribed roles. There is even a question as to how well the board represents its constituencies. It would seem that a key question to be asked by the Lab is---How well is Lab staff meeting the goals and objectives of the program? While it is likely that staff performance is an important and integral factor in Lab operations, it appears to be a glaring oversight when reviewing material that describes the institution as an entity. Recognizing the need for confidentiality, staff may wish to

consider how to include information regarding overall staff productivity in its institutional evaluation reports. This probably gets at the heart of question 10 in the Lab's "Response to Technical Questions." (What areas of staff development are anticipated for the proposed contract period and how are these areas related to proposed staff responsibilities and management objectives?)

In reviewing the charts that show the schedule of activities in the technical proposal, as well as other organization and management material, there does not appear to be an indication of when regular examinations will occur to determine whether program activities are being accomplished as forecast. Given the massive amount of work that is generated at the Lab, a chart showing the intervals for examination of accomplishments (discrepancy analysis) would provide a clearer picture of the institutional management of the Lab. Although Lab staff made it clear that each director oversees the planning, development, and implementation of activities in his or her program or center, it is not clear how such information is provided to the executive committee, governing board, and OERI.

3. Recommendations for improvement

The Lab should consider the impact of the presence of representatives from the primary recipients or beneficiaries of schooling activities on its governing board. It seems feasible to consider not only parent role group participation on the board, but also student representation—even if on a limited but focused basis.

Given the large annual budget provided by OERI as well as funds from other sources, it seems appropriate that CSSOs become more visible on the Lab board. To the extent possible, direct involvement by CSSOs in Lab operations should be encouraged.

In reporting on institutional evaluation, consider including a section that addresses the productivity of Lab staff in accomplishing Lab goals and objectives, i.e.: How well is Lab staff performing in accomplishing the goals and objectives of the organization?

In preparing schedules of activities, Lab should provide information that shows key intervals at which major Lab tasks and or accomplishments will be examined to determine whether they are taking place as planned.

Collaboration among Labs, particularly in the Task 7 specialty areas, should be addressed. It is very likely that individual Labs can benefit from support provided by the Lab in whose region services are being provided.

Comment: It was noted that reports of site visits from OERI staff were not available. Such reports are vital in the overall assessment of Lab performance. This recommendation is not directed to the Lab but rather to OERI, the funding agent. Lab site visits should be followed up with a report that indicates whether or not the Lab is accomplishing its goals and objectives under the funded scope of work.

B. To what extent is the REL using a self-monitoring process to plan and adapt activities in response to feedback and customer needs?

1. Strengths

With regard to using a self-monitoring process, the Lab appears to be meeting expectations under this evaluation item. There is a policy in place that directs the Lab to develop and implement procedures to assure the quality of Lab work as well as the expectation that the board will review results of such work. The procedure regarding this area requires that the Lab establish processes to assure the quality of its products and services. In keeping with these policies and procedures, the Lab has instituted a variety of self-monitoring strategies.

One of the primary vehicles for self-monitoring of Lab services appears to be the “Professional Activity Reporting System” which is designed to track the “the number and nature” of services provided to myriad educational constituents. Additionally, the Lab relies upon such data as demographic studies, needs clarification, information requests, research-based input, public input via telephone surveys and educational gatherings in the region. The Lab appears to carry out an extensive technology based communication system that is both internal and external. It enables staff to interact with constituents in its vast region via a local area network and a web site. Given the large number of “hits” on the web site, Lab staff are able to assess customer needs by the requests for services and products.

In efforts to determine how well it is addressing its self-monitoring processes, the Lab commissioned Dr. Alfred Rasp to conduct an independent study of its needs assessment and institutional evaluation processes. The study, conducted in 1997, contained a number of well-founded recommendations that, if addressed and implemented, would strengthen Lab operations in the area of self-monitoring.

Additional measures to assure quality self-monitoring processes were described in quarterly reports. They included the convening of a three-person panel to review the Lab’s overall institutional evaluation and needs identification processes. This panel stressed the need for the Lab to collect objective data with “candor induction” the goal. The Lab also conducted a comprehensive needs assessment in 1997. The report, “Northwest Trends Shaping Education,” describes 12 trends that are shaping education in the region served by the Lab as well as implications for Laboratory work. In 1997, a telephone survey was conducted by the Gilmore Research Group to determine program satisfaction among Lab clients. These evaluation studies

and a number of other activities clearly indicate the Lab's concern for assuring that effective self-monitoring processes are in place.

2. Areas of needed improvement

Although it is evident the Lab is using extensive self-monitoring processes and is seeking to determine how well it is doing in this area, it is not clear that the findings noted in commissioned studies are being used to improve self-monitoring processes. For instance, in the quarterly report dated April-June 1997, a statement is made that "preliminary findings (in the study by Dr. Rasp) were presented to the board, and recommendations are being considered for strengthening these processes." The Executive Cabinet was to review the final written report on July 3 of next quarter and recommend a course of action. In reviewing subsequent quarterly reports, I found no information about action taken, if any, with regard to the findings and recommendations of the Rasp report. This appears to be the case with other studies conducted to examine self-monitoring processes. While it is very likely that action was taken on the recommendations, there does not appear to be any records or reports addressing the specific action taken for each recommendation or finding.

In the summary of findings of the February 1998 "NWREL Board Post Self-Assessment," which addresses the board's role in approving and monitoring the organization's programs and services, (which of course would include Lab self-monitoring processes), a board member responded: "We certainly hear strengths—sometimes hearing about program weaknesses would be revealing." Another respondent stated: "When program directors (make) presentations at the Board meetings, they are obviously going to dwell on their successes..." Such statements suggest that the board is not fully aware of the strengths and weaknesses of the Lab's major programs. Management staff at the Lab are aware of this concern as indicated by this statement: "This area

of (board) responsibility has shown only slight improvement during the past year. Respondents continue to be concerned with knowing the strengths and weaknesses of each major program.” In discussions with Lab staff, it is clear there is concern about this issue. While the Lab has taken steps to address this issue, there does not appear to be any information (in quarterly reports or separate reports) describing the results of efforts to resolve this issue.

3. Recommendations for improvement

It is recommended that Lab staff consider strategies for formally reporting any actions that respond to the findings in independent studies and evaluation reports commissioned by the Lab. If recommended actions are not taken, this should be reported as well, with an explanation for such decisions.

As the Lab determines and implements concrete and effective ways to keep board members apprised of Lab operations, including strengths and weaknesses, lessons learned should be reported and shared since it is likely other similar education providers are struggling with the same issue.

III. Quality

To what extent is the REL developing high quality products and services?

1. Strengths

The planning, development, and implementation of high quality products and services is, without a doubt, one of the hallmarks in this Lab’s long history of providing educational services in its region and throughout the country. Two signature works provided by the Lab for review are quite overwhelming, so much so that it was virtually impossible to thoroughly review the hundreds of pages contained in each of the binders submitted for review. Strengths noted in the

review of the signature works as well as other products/services and during discussions with Lab staff, and clients include the following: (1) The signature works and other products are being used extensively throughout the Lab region and beyond. (2) Comprehensive quality control procedures are utilized to ensure that products are of the highest quality. Before products are disseminated, a variety of steps are employed in testing for quality including internal and external reviews, pilot tests, follow-up surveys, and consultations with target audiences and unsolicited comments from users. The Lab's standards for developing quality products and services include methodology that is basic to exemplary research and development. Development plans also consider techniques for scaling up activities to reach a larger client pool. Examples of this effort were noted when staff members responsible for the two signature works I reviewed presented information that shows the extent to which the products are used in the region and beyond. (3) Lab staff appear to be heavily involved in research and development and have published numerous publications or have been cited in other publications such as the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. Staff members have also presented their work in conferences, workshop, etc. and have received national recognition for their work.

There is no question, in my view, that Lab staff members are thoroughly steeped in the knowledge base undergirding their products and services. What was even more evident was the pride and joy they displayed in discussing the work they have accomplished. This "affect" seems to permeate the staff from the executive director to program/center directors to staff.

The Lab's research and development products are not limited to showcase print material. Products and services are also designed to be delivered via distance learning technology including the Internet. It appears that such technology is extensively used, probably to a large degree by necessity because of the demographics and vastness of the region served by the Lab.

The five areas in which the Lab is targeting its research and development activities are assessment and evaluation, early childhood education, rural education, school change, and community based learning. The Lab appears to be making progress in these areas of research and is relying on feedback derived from its partner sites in assuring that efforts result in exemplary products and services.

It was noted that the Oregon partner site for research and development in rural education elected to end its partnership relationship and not continue with year four activities. An explanation of or reason for termination of the partnership was not given. It is likely that this is not an unusual occurrence. Yet, there was no information provided that would indicate the Lab has contingency plans for such occurrences.

A survey of client satisfaction with Lab products showed that the impact of the products ranged from a 33 percent “change in the implementation of practices” and 33 percent in the “quality of professional practices were improved” to a 67 percent impact in “decision making and/or planning was facilitated.” This was a small sample, but it is evidence that the Lab recognizes the importance of gathering quality assurance data (whether in small or large samples) in its research and development activities.

Generally, the Lab's attention to developing high quality products and services exceed expectations. It has generated a reputation for being prolific in developing high profile products and services that are in demand at both the regional and national levels.

2. Areas of Needed Improvement/Recommendation

In instances where partner sites terminate their relationship with the Lab, the events causing or leading to termination should be documented and analyzed. Lessons learned may

provide information that could prevent similar occurrences with other sites in the future. If such steps are already used, an explanation should be provided when reporting such occurrences.

IV. Utility

A. To what extent are the products and services provided by the Laboratory useful to, and used by customers?

The Lab's marketing capabilities appear to be very good. A number of products and services have been marketed throughout the region and beyond. The products appear to be based on a variety of needs assessments conducted in the region. Information was provided for this review that shows how long a product has been on the market as well as totals sales and revenues generated by the products. Products developed for clients include research reports and guides, instructional materials, policy papers, handbooks, and synthesis papers. We had an opportunity to tour the resource room which houses the collection of research reports on assessment and were apprised of the procedures for collecting assessment materials as well as procedures for lending material to clients.

In discussions with the trainers and users of products and services under the signature works, "Onward To Excellence," and "Trait-based Assessment," information was presented that indicates Lab clients believe these products are extremely useful and are used by customers. The presenters represented the region served by the Lab (Washington, Oregon, Idaho, and Alaska) and states outside the Lab's designated region (Nevada, Iowa, Mississippi, Kansas, Florida, and Arizona).

1. Strengths

Strengths noted in this area include the following: (1) Staff members involved in the research and development of signature and other works appear to be highly qualified and capable of developing products that are useful to clients. (2) Center and program staff appear to keep abreast of trends in the region and beyond in efforts to develop and provide products and services based on these trends. (3) Products and services, in addition to having a focus on needs in the region, also have a national focus, i.e., charter schools, and community/rural education and school reform.

2. Areas of needed improvement:

While products and services are widely used throughout the region by a variety of client groups, it appears that institutions of higher education (IHEs) are minimally involved in using the products and services offered by the Lab. As one of the key (perhaps even critical) ingredients necessary to implement systemic school change in the region, it is puzzling that the teacher education institutions have what appears to be minimal involvement in Lab efforts toward school change.

A number of the products in the Lab's inventory have been on the market for many months. It is generally assumed that when products no longer generate revenues or requests, they are removed from the inventory. It is not clear, however, to what extent this occurs or what other assessment measures are used to determine why and when products and services are no longer useful to the client group. Staff did state that often products are removed from their inventory to another source such as the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development for dissemination. It would seem that information regarding the "life" of a product would be useful in looking at evolving trends in education in the region and beyond.

3. Recommendations for improvement

There are no specific recommendations under this section. The Lab may wish to consider whether more active involvement of area IHEs would enhance Lab activities in the area of school change with regard to teacher development.

B. To what extent is the REL focused on customer needs?

1. Strengths

The Lab's focus on customer needs appears to be pervasive in the region. In addition to Lab use of a variety of needs assessment strategies to determine appropriate courses of action, a key Lab staff member is assigned as a liaison to each of the states in the region. Information provided by the state liaisons about activities in their respective states indicates that they are very much aware of the myriad educational needs in the states. Staff members are encouraged to spend as much time in the field as possible. Additionally, staff members are required to spend time in classrooms in efforts to remain "grounded" in their primary purpose for providing educational services in the region.

Apparently a new committee on external relations has been created by the board. This committee focuses on goals designed to impact clients through such activities as forums and conferences, and by creating awareness and demand for services. (This committee appears to be a new addition to other board committees because there were no references to it in the technical proposal, annual updates or quarterly reports.) One of the goals of this committee is to focus on three external audiences with priority given to clients. In support of external communication goals, the Lab makes extensive use of Gopher and Web Internet services, a toll free 800 number, and regular meetings with clients. These and other strategies are used extensively to build relationships with new/expanded client groups.

An example of Lab focus on clients includes the translation of products and services into Spanish on behalf of the fairly large Spanish speaking population in the region. A focus on customer needs is also evident in the Lab's research and development efforts on topics that reflect the characteristics of the area such as rural and urban education.

The Lab states that 10,727 individuals from local schools participated in workshops, consultations and conferences in FY98. Participation from local school districts was very high as well. This would suggest that the Lab is giving careful attention to the needs of its customers. Additionally, discussions with Lab trainers and users seem to indicate that the Lab does focus on its customer needs. The participants in the discussions ranged from those who are new clients to those who have been clients for a number of years. In all cases, the discussants stressed the need for more or continued services from the Lab whether through direct involvement or by way of advice or follow-up support.

In providing educational services to its customers, the Lab states that it has established 54 partner sites in which to collaborate and provide support. According to the board members with whom we had discussions, Lab participation in state efforts to effect school change has contributed to school success in a variety of ways. The research-based knowledge in the various content areas including reading, mathematics, etc., has enabled school districts and/or individual schools to make informed decisions about school change. The focus on classroom assessment via the "Trait-based Assessment" and school change via the "Onward To Excellence" programs are being used extensively in statewide improvement efforts.

Board members stated that the Lab has been an extraordinary resource for rural districts in the region and the resources are now more available than ever via such technology as the Internet. Current activities underway in the Rural Education Program include research and development

work on the charter school movement throughout the country. State educators in this region are beginning to consider the implications of charter schools in their respective states. Presently, Alaska is the only state that has a charter school. In response to this move toward charter school, the Lab is conducting meetings, developing products, etc., in efforts to meet customer needs. In response to a question regarding plans for “scaling up” activities with regard to the charter school movement in the region, staff indicated that plans are already underway for implementing training programs on the development and implementation of charter schools.

Activities under the Mathematics and Science Education Center appear to be focused on customer needs. Several products have been developed for dissemination in the region and beyond. The “It’s Just Good Teaching Series” contains six publications and two videos for use by math teachers (K-12). The materials, while based on the latest research, are teacher friendly, i.e., easy to read and use. It was reported that over 10,000 copies of this series have been disseminated since June 1997. In response to a question regarding the use of this series in the preparation of teachers at IHEs, staff indicated that dissemination and use at the IHE level is minimal. As stated earlier in this report, this is unfortunate. It appears to me that there are a number of missed opportunities for collaboration between the Lab and regional IHEs in the area of teacher preparation.

One of the board members provided a most interesting comment regarding the importance of the Lab to the region. He stated: “If we didn’t have the Lab, we would have to create one in the state of Washington.” This and other statements seem to indicate that the Lab is focused on, and responsive to customer needs, and is striving to provide the best services possible to myriad groups of people in an extremely diverse region. The fact is that it is not likely that Lab services

and products would be sought if they did not address the needs and requests of its clients. This Lab appears to receive numerous requests for its services and products.

2. Areas of Needed Improvement/Recommendation:

None noted

V. Outcomes and Impact

A. To what extent is the REL's work contributing to improved student success, particularly in intensive implementation sites?

1. Strengths

The information reviewed seems to indicate that the Lab is contributing somewhat to improved student success. The impact of general services to clients ranged from a low of 30 percent for "student performance was positively affected" to a high of 82 percent for "new skills and/or knowledge acquired." Consideration must be given to the fact that there are many variables over which the Lab has no control, particularly since it does not provide direct services to students even in intensive implementation sites. A statement on page 28 of the Annual Report of Institutional Performance more aptly describes this stance: "NWREL may provide interventions at any or all steps in this continuum (path to improved student outcomes), depending on a client's needs, resources, and interests. In most cases, NWREL services are requested to facilitate just one step in the improvement process, so attempts to measure NWREL's impact on the ultimate goal (improved student outcomes) is not realistic or feasible."

Nevertheless, having said this, the Lab reports that it does monitor the impact of its services with regard to client/student success. A primary vehicle for monitoring its activities is the "Professional Activity Reporting System" (PARS) which documents and tracks services to clients

in seven types of activities. Additional strategies for documenting Lab contributions to student success include client surveys such as the one conducted by the Gilmore Research Group, which was mentioned earlier in this report.

The updated annual report for year four describes the Lab's efforts to monitor the impact of its products and services with regard to student success. This is apparently a slow and somewhat arduous process. Note that in the Rural School Partnership, the Lab had to deal with the fact that one of the sites dropped out of the partnership and in another there was apparently poor communication at the site level and perhaps with Lab staff. Additionally, at least two site liaisons resigned at this site. It would appear that progress in rural, remote areas require more time, ongoing communication, and constant monitoring to assure even minor successes with regard to Lab interventions.

While the impact of services provided is generally positive as noted on a graph depicting the Lab's visibility in the region, it seems that teachers are the least aware of the Lab. Over 40 percent of teachers have not heard of NWREL and only a negligible percentage has used the web site. Approximately 18 percent have used Lab materials and 42 percent have participated in workshops/conferences. This is somewhat disappointing given the three decades the Lab has provided educational services in the region. It would seem that at this point, the Lab would be a household word among educators in the region. Superintendents and principals are much more aware of the Lab. Of course, this is desired and necessary.

In responding to the observation about teacher awareness of the Lab, staff stated that teachers are in fact aware of and use Lab services. The problem is that the Lab name and logo are not always noticed. For example, when asked about the school change model, "Onward to Excellence," teachers were aware of the model. However, they did not attribute the model to the

Lab. This is perhaps the “nature of the beast.” Lab staff stated they were trying to deal with the discrepancies in teacher awareness of the Lab.

During its long history of providing educational services in the northwest, the Lab has worked extensively in Alaska. Current efforts include “Alaska Onward to Excellence,” a field initiated school improvement process. According to recent congressional findings, “Alaska native children enter and exit school with serious educational handicaps.” These children have low performance on standardized tests. The dropout rates are extremely and high Native Alaskans are significantly underrepresented among holders of BA degrees. The geographic barriers to delivering educational services in Alaskan villages as well as other remote areas within the continental US are challenging at best. In efforts to address this seemingly perpetual problem, USED is again funding applications for direct grants under the “Alaska Native Program.” Activities funded under this program include education planning, curriculum development and teacher training; home based education for preschool children; and student enrichment.

Continuous funding of such programs suggest that efforts to improve student success are hampered by intransigent problems that are beyond what can be resolved by any one educational program, whether federal or otherwise, large or small. After many years of providing educational services in areas like Alaska, Lab staff members have developed knowledge and skills that can be used to inform and assist others (such as those who will be awarded grants under the Alaska Native Program) who are attempting to improve education outcomes by, more than likely, doing some of the same things that have already been done by the Lab. This opportunity, if taken, would be an excellent example of networking or collaboration between federally funded education programs as well as with state and local education programs.

Regarding Lab efforts to increase knowledge and understanding of educational problems, issues, and effective strategies, its inventory is replete with research and development products and services. Many such items have been mentioned in other parts of this report. Other examples examined include the Catalogue of School Reform, which was developed in collaboration with the Education Commission of the States for the Department of Education; “Choice Matters,” which provides policy alternatives and implication for charter schools; and “Charter Schools at the Crossroads,” which presents the proceedings of a symposium on charter school policy. These publications, as well as others are designed to inform; not only the Lab’s designated region, but also the nation as a whole, about “hot” issues on the education scene.

Laboratory work appears to be consistent with national priorities. The Lab, for many years has been on the forefront in contributing to the knowledge and understanding of educational problems, issues, and effective practices. Areas addressed by the Lab that have national significance include such examples as the model on implementing school change (Onward to Excellence) which is used throughout the country. Staff members involved in this project have developed national reputations and readily inform others of the continuing developments in school reform.

2. Areas of needed improvement

The Lab has candidly provided information that shows staff awareness of the areas of consideration or need of improvement with regard to its overall contribution to improved student success. These recommendations, which are a result of its own internal assessment, could be placed in any section of this report. However, they are restated in this section because of the overall purpose of Labs, which is to provide exemplary educational services that result in improved student outcomes. The Lab has stated its intent to: (1) Create a means for assessing the

understanding of the Lab as an institution. (2) Broaden surveys designed to determine knowledge acquisition and use of services to include community and other groups. (3) Increase evaluations of individual programs and projects. (4) Compile and make public more rich stories from participants in Lab work.

B. To what extent does the Laboratory assist states and localities to implement comprehensive school improvement strategies?

1. Strengths

The Lab appears to be meeting expectations with regard to providing assistance in implementing comprehensive school improvement strategies. A major assistance effort is the Lab's involvement with the Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration (CSRD) program, which "provides funds to help schools adopt effective, research-based comprehensive school reform models that will help all students reach high standards." Funds are provided to SEAs who then award competitive grants to local school districts. The Lab appears to be providing valuable assistance to SEAs and LEAs that will enable these entities to "get started." Assistance includes providing information on school change models, and working with states and school districts as they engage in the process of selecting and implementing models. Assistance from the Lab has enabled the five states in its region to accomplish many of the tasks necessary to acquire funding under CSRD.

Assistance in school change is provided not only locally but nationally as well. As noted earlier, services and products are based on sound research and development activities. With regard to "scaling-up," the Lab appears to have given careful consideration to how to make school change processes accessible to its region and beyond. The two signature works provided

by the Lab for this review are examples of efforts to assist in the implementation of school change. The works have been used in several sites in the country.

2. Areas of needed improvement

A “technical question” posed to the Lab about reform assistance asked: “.... How does the offeror (Lab) intend to reach out to other schools not yet interested in reform, particularly as the offeror appears to select only schools already receptive to change as partners in its development and applied research work?” The response to this question included steps that would be taken to reach out to schools not interested in reform including presentations, publicity about successful school reform efforts, and outreach with other service providers such as the Comprehensive Assistance Centers. It was further stated that the Lab is “well known by over 90 percent of all local school leaders and over 50 percent of the region’s 100,000 teachers put us in a strong position to reach out effectively to all.”

As far as the question above, there is evidence in the quarterly reports and updated annual plans that the state liaisons are providing what appear to be exemplary services in their respective states. What is not clear is the extent to which the Lab has been able to reach out to schools not interested in change initiatives. Have the proposed attempts to reach out to such schools been successful and if so, is the Lab providing the assistance needed? If attempts have been made and were not successful, is there any documented evidence regarding the resistance to change that might inform others who are trying to reach the hard-to-reach? Such “lessons learned” would be valuable to other institutions trying to effect institutional school change.

3. Recommendations for improvement

The Lab may wish to revisit technical question 4 and its response to the question. This appears to be a critical issue that must be addressed by those involved in educational change

efforts. NWREL, with its experience in working in areas where there is little or no interest in education change (for a variety of reasons including lack of awareness, isolation), has the resources to delve into this issue and so inform others wrestling with the same problem.

C. To what extent has the REL made progress in establishing a regional and national reputation in its specialty area?

1. Strengths

NCREL has clearly established a regional and national reputation in its specialty area, which is school change. Efforts to facilitate school change have been ongoing for the past 15 years. A major outcome of this effort is the comprehensive “Onward to Excellence II: A Systemic Reform” (OTE). This program is designed to facilitate systemic school change and is being used in schools throughout the country. In efforts to enhance this long term project, as well as minimize duplication, the Lab is involved in a partnership that includes the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University and the Consortium for Policy Research in Education. Worthy of note is a national conference conducted by this partnership in October 1996. This was an invitational conference that focused on scaling-up school change. Participants at the conference included national reform networks, other regional Labs, and state and local education entities.

The Lab seeks to support systemic school reform via a variety of activities including conferences, and on-site technical assistance. A description of products and services was provided for review. The tracking system for Lab services and products indicate that thousands of school improvement products have been disseminated. At the same time completed products are being disseminated, the Lab is developing and producing new products on school change.

It is interesting to note that all of the Lab's work can be linked to school change. For instance, the presentations on the activities in the Mathematics and Science Education Center and the Rural Education Program included several descriptions of services and products that contribute to school change. The Lab appears to be addressing school change not only at the institutional level through such programs as "Onward to Excellence: A Systemic Reform Model" and "Trait-based Assessment," but at the classroom level through such products as "It's Just Good Teaching: Inquiry Strategies for Science and Mathematics Learning." There are a number of other services and products that show the breadth of the Lab's work in its specialty area.

A description of the Lab's strategic alliances seems to indicate that comprehensive efforts in school change are extensive. This effort has reached to the national level via other Labs and other education agencies. Regional efforts are pervasive in states such as Montana and Alaska, which are participating in the Lab's "Onward to Excellence Program." Additionally, Lab staff have written a number of articles which have been published or are "in press."

Customers using products and services in the specialty area include educators from within the region and nationally. Discussions with the panel of customers using "Onward to Excellence" indicate they are very satisfied with this change program. They readily described the benefits and impact attributable to the program. When asked to discuss what they would do differently and what they saw as next steps in efforts to effect school change, the consensus seemed to be to continue their efforts at their respective sites with as much ongoing support from the Lab as possible.

2. Areas of needed improvement

None noted

VI. Broad Summary

Overall, the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory is meeting and/or exceeding expectations in accomplishing the goals and objectives under the OERI scope of work. The Lab has developed an exemplary track record over a number of years. Lab operations are managed by a very capable and committed director who is sensitive to the bottom line in all Lab activities and that is: “Will the work we do benefit children in the classroom.” The highly qualified staff mirrors this sentiment by seeking to produce and deliver research based products and services that have been tediously developed before they are used in the field. It is clearly evident that the Lab is providing services that are needed and appreciated in its region and beyond.

I was impressed by the willingness of the director and staff to provide answers to rather probing questions with candor and openness. At all times during this visit, we were encouraged to ask for more information if we believed it would aid us in doing our job. When it was necessary to request more information, it was provided immediately or placed at our stations by the time we arrived at the Lab the next day.

Where concerns are noted in this review it is likely information was available, but perhaps overlooked or misunderstood. In instances where the director and staff agree that areas of concern and/or recommendations are “on target,” it is my guess the issues in question will be addressed in a professional and timely manner.